



HR0419

LRB096 12744 GRL 26973 r

1

HOUSE RESOLUTION

2           WHEREAS, The members of the Illinois House of  
3 Representatives are saddened to learn of the death of former  
4 Chicago Alderman Leon Despres, who passed away on May 6, 2009;  
5 and

6           WHEREAS, Leon Despres was born Leon Mathis Despres on  
7 February 2, 1908; he was the son of Samuel and Henrietta  
8 Rubovitz Despres; he married Marian Alschuler on September 10,  
9 1931; and

10           WHEREAS, Leon Despres and his family moved to Hyde Park  
11 when he was three; after beginning his high school education at  
12 Hyde Park High School, his mother decided he wasn't working  
13 hard enough, so she sent him to boarding school in Rome and  
14 then Paris; he then returned to Hyde Park to attend the  
15 University of Chicago; he received his undergraduate degree in  
16 1927 and his law degree in 1929; and

17           WHEREAS, From 1935 to 1937, Leon Despres served as a trial  
18 examiner for the National Labor Relations Board; always a  
19 strong voice for organized labor, in 1937, after police killed  
20 10 demonstrators at a Memorial Day march against Republic  
21 Steel, he helped organize a protest rally that is now regarded  
22 as a seminal event in American labor history and the cause of

1 workers' rights; during this time, he visited Leon Trotsky in  
2 Mexico, a trip that featured him escorting legendary artist  
3 Frida Kahlo to the movies while her husband, Diego Rivera,  
4 painted a portrait of Marian Despres; and

5 WHEREAS, Leon Despres served as general counsel for the  
6 American Civil Liberties Union's Illinois division from 1948  
7 until 1955, when he was elected to serve as alderman of  
8 Chicago's 5th Ward; determined to serve his constituents in the  
9 face of the Chicago machine, he fought bitter election battles  
10 in 1955 and 1959; in 1967, the Chicago machine gave way and he  
11 became the only aldermanic candidate endorsed by both Democrats  
12 and Republicans; after his retirement in 1975, he continued his  
13 active presence in his community and became involved in the  
14 fight against a high-rise condo in his neighborhood; and

15 WHEREAS, Leon Despres often served as the sole voice of  
16 equality and freedom during his tenure on the Chicago City  
17 Council; he voted against the council's ban on the Reverend  
18 Martin Luther King Jr.'s open-occupancy marches in August of  
19 1966, despite the ban's near-unanimous approval; only one other  
20 alderman supported Mr. Despres when he opposed the construction  
21 of new Chicago Housing Authority high-rise buildings,  
22 buildings that would become centers of crime and poverty in the  
23 city for decades; he fought against discrimination in hospital  
24 staff appointments, cemeteries, and housing and opposed de

1 facto school segregation, fights that would gain him long and  
2 hard-earned victories for equality; he was also an early voice  
3 for women's rights and, among his successes, was persuading the  
4 Chicago Transit Authority to hire female bus drivers; and

5 WHEREAS, Leon Despres was well ahead of his time in  
6 advocating important causes regarding the health, heritage,  
7 and rights of all citizens; he was the first to speak openly  
8 about lead paint and the dangers it posed; he drafted Chicago's  
9 first ordinance establishing a landmarks preservation  
10 commission and initiated the fight to save Robie House, a  
11 structure built by Frank Lloyd Wright, from destruction by the  
12 Chicago Theological Seminary; Mr. Despres, along with fellow  
13 Alderman Charles Chew, chartered two airplanes to take 184  
14 people to Alabama to participate in Dr. Martin Luther King's  
15 famous voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery in March of  
16 1965; he fought against official artistic censorship, having  
17 opposed a City Council vote to condemn Wright Junior College  
18 for putting James Baldwin's "Another Country" on the required  
19 reading list of a contemporary literature class; he tried to  
20 end funding to the city panel in charge of determining which  
21 movies could be shown in Chicago; he also fought to abolish the  
22 police department's secret spying unit and urged the Chicago  
23 Housing Authority to consider the use of low-rise,  
24 scattered-site housing for needy Chicago residents; and

1           WHEREAS, While Leon Despres fought many lofty and  
2 principled battles, he took great care to ensure that the more  
3 routine requests for services and assistance from his  
4 constituents did not fall by the wayside; the Chicago History  
5 Museum houses his archives, which include the records of 20,000  
6 aldermanic requests he received from constituents, along with  
7 the evidence of his follow-through on every one of them; and

8           WHEREAS, Leon Despres served as parliamentarian for the  
9 Chicago City Council from 1979 to 1987; he also served on the  
10 Chicago Plan Commission during the period; in the last decade,  
11 he returned to the private practice of law; even past 100 years  
12 old, he remained vital and active in the community, listening  
13 to people's problems, speaking before groups, supporting  
14 candidates, fighting on behalf of displaced Chicago Housing  
15 Authority tenants, and writing postcards almost every day to  
16 applaud the good that others were doing; and

17           WHEREAS, Leon Despres published his memoirs, entitled  
18 "Challenging the Daley Machine: A Chicago Alderman's Memoir",  
19 in 2005; and

20           WHEREAS, Leon Despres' wife, Marian, was a remarkable and  
21 accomplished woman in her own right; she helped lead the fight  
22 to integrate the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools,  
23 initiated the Chicago Architecture Foundation's docent

1 program, and was appointed by her former student, former  
2 Chicago Mayor Harold Washington, to the Chicago Landmarks  
3 Commission; and

4 WHEREAS, Leon Despres is survived by his children, Linda  
5 Despres Baskin and Robert Despres, and his grandson, Frederick  
6 Despres; and

7 WHEREAS, Despite regular ridicule and denunciations from  
8 fellow elected officials, Leon Despres unwaveringly maintained  
9 the courage of his convictions; many of his early principled  
10 and progressive humanitarian stands in the face of  
11 full-throated opposition on a variety of issues were, in time,  
12 fully vindicated and came to be widely accepted as correct; the  
13 words written by Robert Whittington more than 450 years ago in  
14 praise of Sir Thomas More apply equally well to Leon Despres,  
15 "...a man of an angel's wit and singular learning. I know not  
16 his fellow. For where is the man of that gentleness, lowliness  
17 and affability? And, as time requireth, a man of marvelous  
18 mirth and pastimes, and sometime of as sad gravity. A man for  
19 all seasons."; therefore, be it

20 RESOLVED, BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE  
21 NINETY-SIXTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF ILLINOIS, that we  
22 mourn, along with his family and friends, the passing of Leon  
23 Despres; and be it further

1           RESOLVED, That a suitable copy of this resolution be  
2 presented to the family of Leon Despres as an expression of our  
3 sympathy.